

Loew's Victoria Theater  
235-237 West 125th Street  
New York  
New York County  
New York

HABS No. NY-6283

HABS  
NY,  
31-NE40,  
109-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
MID-ATLANTIC REGION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS  
NY,  
31-N140,  
109-

LOEW'S VICTORIA THEATER

HABS NO. NY-6283

Location:

235-237 West 125th Street, beginning at the northerly side of West 125th Street, distant 275' west of the intersection formed by the west side of Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard (Seventh Avenue) and the north side of West 125th Street running thence 99'-11" north at right angles to West 125th Street, thence east 50' along a line parallel with the north side of West 125th Street, thence north 99'-11" to the southerly side of West 126th Street, thence along said street a distance of 150', thence south 99'-11" perpendicular to West 126th Street, thence east along a line parallel to West 125th Street, thence 99'-11" south to the north side of west 125th Street, thence 50" east to the point or place of beginning, New York County, New York

Present Owner:

Harlem Urban Development Corporation  
163 West 125th Street  
New York, New York 10027

Present Occupant:

Vacant

Significance:

The Loew's Victoria Theater was one of the many theaters in the United States that was part of the Loew's theater chain during the early twentieth century. It is architecturally significant as a representative example of theater architecture of the 1920's in New York City and as a major surviving example of the work of Thomas White Lamb, the most prolific theater architect in the United States.

## PART I HISTORICAL INFORMATION

### A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: September, 1917. The opening date for the theater is October 5, 1917, according to the records of the Theater Historical Society.
2. Architect: Thomas White Lamb was a prominent theater architect of the early twentieth century. Mr. Lamb was born in 1871 in Dundee, Scotland and came to America as a boy of 12. He studied architecture at the Cooper Union Institute. In 1908, he was called on by Marcus Loew, founder of Loews Inc., to draw up specifications for the motion picture houses of the company, which was then beginning to expand into a vast chain. Among the Broadway theaters, other than the Loew's Victoria, Mr. Lamb designed the Capitol, the Strand, the Rivoli, the Rialto and the Loew's State Building and Theater. It was estimated that Mr. Lamb drew up the plans for more than 300 theaters in the United States and in England, Australia, India, South Africa and Egypt. Mr. Lamb was the designer of several buildings other than theaters in Manhattan. He was the architect for the Hotel Paramount, Pythian Temple and the renovated Madison Square Garden. In 1932, Mr. Lamb received an honorable mention in an international competition sponsored by the Russian government for a design for the Palace of the Soviets at Moscow.

Thomas Lamb was head of the firm of architects of Thomas W. Lamb, Inc. Mr. Lamb was active in the program sponsored by the Sixth Avenue Association to rehabilitate the avenue after the elevated structure was demolished. He was chairman of a committee of architecture which drew up specifications for many improvements of properties along the avenue. He was a member of the NY Society of Architects and the NYS Association of Architects.

### 3. Original and subsequent owners:

1922- Arthur Brisbane held title to the land and leased the property to the Loew's Corporation, which lease expired in 1977.

1922- 1977 - 235-237 West 125th Street Corporation, whose principals were found to be Sarah P. Mellen, Seward Brisbane and Alice Chandor, Trustees for the Estate of Arthur Brisbane, although several transfers had occurred in the period the Brisbane family owned the property.

1977- present - Harlem Urban Development Corporation

### 4. Builders, Suppliers:

Builders: The Loew's Victoria was built by Fleishmann Construction Company which was owned by the Loews Corporation and was the builder for all the Loews theaters. As indicated in the Architecture and Buildings Volume 50, 1918.

Suppliers: The ornamental plaster- Architectural Plastering Company, curtains, draperies and stage rigging- William Camph, Clancy stage hardware and builders hardware furnished by A.W. Gerstner W. Victoria

Plush, electric stage fittings-Universal Electric Stage light Company mural decorations-Arthur Brownnet, Copper Kalamein doors and windows United Metal covered door sash 10, slatting-A.H. Andrews Company, Knowles mushroom ventilators used, terra cotta- South Amboy Terra Cotta Company. ( information from Architecture and Building, Volume 50, January, 1918.)

5. Original plans and construction: The original plans are dated 1917. They consist of a series of longitudinal sections, floor plans and working drawings. Many of them are still readable, there are a few that not as clear. Original drawings are in the collection of the New York City Department of Buildings.
6. Alterations and additions: It appears that the structure has been virtually left intact, except that the walls of the ticket lobby and outer lobby have been modernized in Art Deco fashion, probably in the late 1930's.

#### B. Historical Context:

The 1910s and '20s were the heyday of theater construction in New York City as legitimate theaters proliferated and clustered about the Times Square area and movie houses and vaudeville facilities were built in many sections of New York City. While Times Square was the heart of the theater district, with both playhouses and movie theaters, Harlem, which by 1920 contained two thirds of the city's black population, was another important theater enclave. Today the majority of New York City's theaters survive in the Times Square area; the survival of the Loew's Victoria is much rarer.

The Loew's Victoria located in Harlem opened October, 1917 as a film house, "as one of the largest and most beautiful theaters in greater N.Y."...devoted to high class vaudeville and the very best of motion pictures...Loew's Victoria will be the last word in the theater construction(May 13, 1916 Exhibitions Herald, Vol.II, Number 46). The Loew's cost \$250,000 to build. The Victoria, one of the many Loew's theaters in New York City, joined many other great theaters in Harlem of that era such as the Proctor, Hammerstein Opera House, Alhambra, Percy Williams, Lafayette and the world famous Apollo Theater.

The Victoria had 2,394 seats and was one of the Big Time Vaudeville theaters with 2 shows a day until 1930. It had a Moller organ 3 manual 17 rank later replaced by Rolent Morton organ. The Victoria was built on 125th Street, the main shopping, cultural and entertainment center of Harlem.

The opening night of the Loew's Victoria was one of the grandest of all Loew's theater openings. The collection of celebrities was the largest ever at a Loew's opening. The guest of honor for the evening was Elsie Ferguson who was a remarkable and well known

actress appearing in the film "Barbary Sheep". Fatty Arbuckle, famous screen comedian, was also present. Irving Berlin, a close friend of Marcus Loew who never missed a Loew's theater opening was present. Raymond and Caverly (the "wizards of joy") in their new act "The Submarines" headed the opening night vaudeville program. The Hirshchoff Troupe played in "A Russian Wedding". (N.Y. Telegraph, Sept. 30, 1917)

In 1972, the Loew's Victoria for the last time was filled with stars of stage and screen honoring The Dance Theater of Harlem. The evening's co-hostesses were Leontyne Price and Lena Horne. More than 2,200 people attended the benefit which included over 50 entertainers with such names as Brock Peters, Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee and Cab Calloway.

In June 1977 the Loew's Victoria closed its doors for the last time, this event left Harlem without a major theater house until this day.

## PART II ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural Character: The Loew's Victoria theater was a product of Thomas Lamb's earliest design period from 1912-1917, inspired by the Italian Renaissance Classicism of the Adam Brothers in England during the third quarter of the 18th Century.
2. Condition of the fabric: The exterior design of the building facing 125th Street is a relatively simple classically-inspired one, faced with glazed terra cotta, featuring a colonnade at the second and third floors and a paneled roof parapet. A large marquee and vertical sign dominate the facade. All the interior detail has remained essentially intact although plaster and paint have deteriorated since the theater has been vacant for several years.

### B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The theater is a three story structure with glazed terra cotta face featuring a colonnade at the second and third floors and a paneled parapet roof.
2. The interior space consists of a ticket lobby, outer lobby, inner lobby auditorium, and balcony level lobby. The inner lobby is a two story space with an impressive staircase leading up to the balcony level; it features handsome wall murals. The auditorium with one deep balcony is the major interior space. It features a handsome arched proscenium, side box set below triumphal arches, a very large and impressive ceiling dome, and murals on the side walls at balcony level. The detail is all classically inspired. The balcony level lobby features an oval room with ceiling dome.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural drawings: The original drawings were obtained from the New York City Department of Buildings and are dated February, 1917 and are presented herein.
- B. Historic Views: Early photographs of the Loew's Victoria exist on a limited basis on microfiche and microfilm; however these were not available for good reproductions. (New York Public Library Microforms)
- C. Interviews: Discussions were conducted with Michael R. Miller, Director Theater Historical Society.

D. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission files:  
Loew's Victoria Environmental Survey  
Avery Library, Columbia University Graduate School of  
Planning: Card File, Theaters  
New York Public Library, Main Reading Room, Microfilm  
and New York City Photograph Collection  
Lincoln Center Library, Theater Research

2. Secondary and published sources:

Hart, Claudia, New York Theaters of Thomas Lamb, Historic  
Preservation Graduate Thesis, 1983

Hall, Ben M., The Best Remaining Seats: The Story of the  
Bolder Age of the Movie Palaces, N.Y. Clarkson and  
Potter, 1961

Architecture and Building, Volume 50, January, 1918.

Exhibitors Herald, May 13, 1916 pg. 27

N.Y. Telegraph, September 30, 1917

N.Y. Post, November 14, 1912

Artcraft Advance, August 20, 1917

E. Likely sources not yet investigated:

Municipal Archives, New York City Department of Buildings  
Original Building Permit, MB Docket Book for 1916, Bldg  
No. 383-1916.

Loews' Corporation files

New York Historical Society files

Bronx County Historical Society, Bronx Home News,  
Yorkville-Harlem editions.

F. Supplemental material: Original plans and specifications, photocopies.  
New York Times article Feb. 27, 1942, and N.Y. Herald Tribune, Feb. 27, 1942.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

The Loew's Victoria Theater will be rehabilitated as a quad cinema to include 2,225 seats for use as a first run movie house, that will contribute to the increased nightlife and entertainment activity in Harlem, as well as a traffic generator that will contribute to increasing retail sales on 125th Street. The theater will feature two 500 seat movie theaters-two 420 seat movie theaters- a restaurant or other retail activity and complimentary uses for excess space. The project is sponsored by the owner, Harlem Urban Development Corporation which will require major interior renovation and equipment installation. The architect is Michael Schimenti, P.C. with a total development cost of \$2,650,000 and financing being provided by-- NYC/ UDAC loan \$800,000, HUDC \$300,000, Developer's Equity \$500,000 and Chemical Bank loan \$1,050,000. The project team includes Cine 42nd Street Theater, Leonard Clark, President.

Prepared by: Linda Mayo-Perez  
Title:  
Affiliation: Consultant to HUDC  
Date: June 13, 1985

## A NOTED ARCHITECT

Designer of Madison Square Garden and Capitol, Rivoli Theatres Stricken Here

### HIS PRACTICE WORLD-WIDE

Won Mention in Competition for Palace of the Soviets— Former Building Inspector

Thomas White Lamb, architect, who designed Madison Square Garden, the Pythian Temple and scores of theatres in several parts of the world, among them the Capitol and Rivoli in this city, died yesterday afternoon while visiting the real estate office of the Cross & Brown Company at 270 Madison Avenue. He was 71 years old.

Although he achieved his widest fame in the design of theatres and other places of amusement, Mr. Lamb also drew the plans for many other structures in this city. He was the architect for several apartment hotels, for the "rooftop auto parking station" at Fifty-third Street and Seventh Avenue, for the parking lot on the site of the old Hippodrome and for the bus terminal, restaurant and store building which extends from 237-47 West Fiftyth Street to West Fifty-first Street.

Mr. Lamb won honorable mention in 1932 in a world-wide competition for designs for the Palace of the Soviets in Moscow. Theatres in India, Australia, Egypt, England, Canada and South Africa have been built from his plans.

Among the buildings here which he designed are the Cort, State, Regent, Rialto, Ziegfeld and all the Trans Lux theatres, the International Casino, the Golden Gate Ballroom in Harlem and the National Vaudeville Association clubhouse.

He resided for a time at the vaudeville clubhouse, where his showfolk neighbors taught him to dance. One of his fond recollections, he told an interviewer three years ago, was of the time Will Rogers saw him dancing at the Cotton Club and shouted, "Hot dawg, go to it, Lamb!"

Mr. Lamb was born in Dundee, Scotland, and came to this country as a boy. He studied architecture at the Cooper Union Institute and was for a time a civil service building inspector. He was a director of the Sixth Avenue Association and chairman of its rehabilitation committee. Mr. Lamb was head of the firm of architects of Thomas W. Lamb, Inc., 36 West Fortieth Street. His home was at 1 East Eighty-eighth Street.

He leaves a widow, the former Rhett Hurry; five sons, Thomas A., Bruce J., Richard G., Stuart M. and William G., and a daughter, Nancy B. Lamb.

## Thomas W. Lamb Dies; Designed The Garden and 300 Theaters

Architect, 71, Collapses at Telephone, Capitol, Strand, Rivoli, Rialto, Loew's State, Hotel Paramount, Pythian Temple Among His Works

Thomas W. Lamb, architect, who designed some of the largest motion-picture theaters on Broadway and also the Madison Square Garden at Eighth Avenue and Fiftieth Street, died of a heart ailment at 1:30 p. m. yesterday in the offices of Cross & Brown Co., real estate, at 270 Madison Avenue. He was seventy-one years old.

Mr. Lamb was using the telephone in the office of Elliott De Witt Dunn, vice-president of Cross & Brown, when he collapsed. He and Mr. Dunn had just returned from luncheon. Mr. Lamb lived at 1 East Eighty-eighth Street.

Mr. Lamb was president of Thomas W. Lamb, Inc., 36 West Fortieth Street, since it was founded twenty-eight years ago. He designed theaters for Loews, Inc.; Warner Brothers Theaters, Inc.; Radio-Keith-Orpheum, Inc., and many smaller companies. He also remodeled several legitimate theaters.

Mr. Lamb was born in Dundee, Scotland, and was brought to the United States when he was twelve years old. He was graduated from Cooper Union and soon after beginning his career as an architect he specialized in theaters. In 1908 he was called on by Marcus Loew, founder of Loews, Inc., to draw up specifications for the motion-picture houses of the company, which was then beginning to expand into a vast chain. He continued at that job until his death.

Among the Broadway theaters Mr. Lamb designed were the Capitol, the Strand, the Rivoli, the Rialto and the Loew's State Building and Theater. He was consultant architect for the Center Theater in Radio City, and he also designed the Trans-Lux Theaters. It was estimated that Mr. Lamb drew up the plans for more than 300 theaters in the United States and in England, Australia, India, South Africa and Egypt.

Mr. Lamb also was the designer for several buildings other than

theaters in Manhattan. He was the architect for the Hotel Paramount, 235 West Forty-sixth Street, and the Pythian Temple, owned by the Knights of Pythias, at 135 West Seventieth Street. In 1938 he designed a "roof-top" parking station, a one-story structure at Seventh Avenue and Fifty-third Street, with a garage on the main floor and parking space on the roof.

In 1932 Mr. Lamb received honorable mention in an international competition sponsored by the Russian government for a design for the Palace of the Soviets at Moscow. Mr. Lamb submitted a plan intended to make the structure "panic-proof" through an unusually large number of exits which would permit the exodus of 20,000 persons from all parts of the vast building with comparative ease. The Soviets accepted a design by B. M. Iofan, Russian architect, for the palace.

Mr. Lamb also was active in the program sponsored by the Sixth Avenue Association to rehabilitate the avenue after the elevated structure was demolished. He was chairman of a committee of architects which drew up specifications for many improvements of properties along the avenue, and he also drew up plans for a municipally owned opera house at the north end of the avenue seating 5,000 persons. He also advocated, as part of the avenue-beautifying program, the building of a municipal auto-parking garage under the west portion of Bryant Park, from Fortieth to Forty-second Street.

Mr. Lamb was a member of the New York Society of Architects and the New York State Association of Architects.

Surviving are his wife, the former Rhett Hurry, who was visiting in Canada yesterday; a daughter, Miss Nancy Beatrice Lamb, and five sons: Thomas A. Lamb, of Pleasantville, N. Y.; Bruce J. Lamb, of Houston, Tex.; Richard G. Lamb, a student at Deerfield Academy, Deerfield, Mass., and Stuart M. and William G. Lamb, both in the Army.



